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ABSTRACT

The International Communication Agency (ICA) was created in April 1978 to help facilitate relations between the United States and other nations. Its main function is to enrich the supplies of information among peoples in order to enhance understanding. An examination of the international context in which the ICA will operate reveals the urgent need for shared knowledge and understanding. The ICA will continue the information dissemination and exchange programs of its two predecessors, the United States Information Agency and the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. It will also have a number of new emphases, including one on the function of communication in foreign relations and a shift from the use of persuasion to that of dialogue in dealing with other nations. Among the problems faced by the ICA are the need to overcome the outdated and artificial distinctions between "information" and "culture," the need to develop a conceptual framework for its work, and the need to inform United States citizens about its work. (GW)

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ON THE NEW INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION AGENCY

ADDRESS BY CHARLES W. BRAY III
BEFORE THE
28th ANNUAL MEETING
OF THE
INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
April 27, 1978

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Charles W. Bray III

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

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I am delighted to have this opportunity to address an audience with which we at the International Communication Agency have so much in common. What we share goes beyond the coincidence of an identical acronym -- "ICA." We have a common professional interest in the phenomenon of communication.

This occasion is also a rare opportunity. For in extending his invitation to speak about the new International Communication Agency, Dean Williams described your Association as "a positive and interested constituency."

That makes you unique, as audiences go. Americans generally, I am afraid, are not even aware of our function. Partly this is because until the creation of our new Agency on April 1 ours was largely a one-way function. "Telling America's Story to the World" was the legend on the building in Washington that housed one of our predecessors, the U.S. Information Agency.

We took that legend down on April 1. If I were to choose a replacement it would be the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes: "Man's mind, stretched to a new idea, never goes back to its original dimension." Or perhaps Emily Dickinson's more succinct expression of the same idea -- "No bird resumes its egg."

Let me impose upon your positive interest, first, to describe the international context that poses the challenge and offers the opportunity to our new Agency. Then I should like to outline what our ICA is, what it does, what is new about it; and finally to discuss some of the problems we face.

First, the international context. I believe that the single most important factor in shaping that context today is the phenomenon of communication. I also believe that the creation of the International Communication Agency marks a dramatic new phase in the importance accorded to the kinds of programs and activities for which we are responsible.

Never before has the world seemed so small.

Never before have important domestic issues and problems spilled over so often to touch the vital concerns of other nations, and perhaps more importantly to touch the lives of other peoples.

Perhaps never before have solutions to bedrock problems affecting very large numbers of the world's peoples seemed more elusive, nor artificial barriers erected between constructive minds more feckless.

Never before, as I suddenly realized in reading a perceptive article by Grace Levine in a recent issue of the Journal of Communication, have the world's media been so effective in conveying the subliminal message of "learned helplessness" to so many individuals on whose sense of learned potency our collective future may rest.

Never before has there been such an extraordinary level of international travel, communication and contact -- nor such remarkable opportunities for trafficking in constructive ideas.

Yet never before has the risk that nations will fail to deal rationally with each other -- or with a clear view of where others stand and why -- posed such potentially widespread and catastrophic consequences.

For these reasons, never before has the need for shared knowledge and understanding among the peoples of the world been so great.

Surely there will always be real conflicts of interest among peoples and nations, just as there are real differences within our own society. But we must also recognize that there are a host of "imagined" or potential conflicts that can be avoided. And let us also appreciate how much more intelligently and peacefully real conflicts can be dealt with if the peoples of the world know and understand more about each other, if they are distracted to a minimum by misperceptions and misapprehensions.

The principal function of the International Communication Agency, President Carter has said, is "to reduce the degree to which misperceptions and misunderstandings complicate relations between the United States and other nations. In international affairs, as in our private lives, the starting point for dealing effectively with others is the clearest possible understanding of other points of view."

Let me translate the vital sense of this into current events with which we are all familiar.

Would the controversy over the landing rights for the Concorde in New York City have raged quite so emotionally or proved quite so intractable if some representative sample of the citizens of Queens had visited for a period with their counterparts in France and the United Kingdom?

Might President Sadat's peace initiative have taken hold more securely had the Arabs and the Israelis been more directly, more intimately, in touch with each other over the last 30 years?

That we can raise such questions about so many issues in world affairs points to an inescapable conclusion: Traditional government-to-government diplomacy is no island unto itself. It does not operate in a vacuum. Its success or failure is shaped by the international environment in which it is conducted.

Relations among peoples; the hopes, the aspirations and the perceptions of different societies; the extent to which people know and understand and have contact with each other -- all these provide the context within which traditional diplomacy operates. They are the fundamental building blocks of the international environment.

Now, what is the International Communication Agency? I want to avoid the organizational chart approach. I do, however, want to mention the two main constituent parts of the new agency in tribute to the three decades of solid accomplishment they have bequeathed. They are the former United States Information Agency, including the Voice of America, and the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, which administered all exchange of persons programs. Perhaps the best and most meaningful way to describe ICA is to say that it is the first Agency of the Executive Branch

created to deal centrally with the two most important elements in our relations with other nations -- people and ideas.

That is an abstract statement. It calls for concrete example. To convey what the International Communication Agency does, and at the same time suggest a means of gauging the importance of its work, I should like to pose a series of questions:

-- Does it matter that on any given morning editors and government officials around the world receive the full text of a major speech on -- say -- nuclear policy made by our President the day before? Or is it sufficient that they learn of it -- if at all -- through the abbreviated filter of wire service accounts?

-- Does it matter that under the Fulbright program some 80,000 foreign scholars have spent academic years in the United States and that some 40,000 American Fulbrighters have gone abroad to teach and study since 1948?

-- Does it matter that each year almost 2,000 potentially influential young foreigners have been brought to the United States to get to know us first hand, including -- in the 1950's and 60's -- Presidents Sadat and Giscard d'Estaing and Chancellor Schmidt? Does it matter that a total of 38 individuals who participated in these programs now head foreign governments, that 11 members of the new French Cabinet and 10 of the new Indonesian Cabinet came to know us at first-hand through the same programs?

-- Did it matter that recently a group of Arab journalists visited the United States under our auspices to see, on the spot, how American foreign policy is formulated and to acquire a feeling for American public opinion? Did it matter that they were able to articulate the Arab point of view in discussions across the country?

-- Does it matter that the Voice of America broadcasts more than 800 hours each week in 36 languages? Does it matter that an estimated 74 million people abroad -- of whom a very large proportion are in the Soviet Union -- regularly listen to VOA?

-- Does it matter that American libraries and cultural centers in more than 100 countries are esteemed as local institutions? Does it matter that they distribute American publications, present exhibits, engage in student counselling and English teaching, provide library services, show the best of American films? And does it matter that they organize reciprocal visits and study tours by poets, political figures, journalists, scientists and men and women of letters?

I submit that it does matter, because I do believe, as I have already suggested, that "man's mind, stretched to a new idea, never goes back to its original dimension."

My inventory of some of the activities in which the International Communication Agency engages may prompt you to observe that they are not new. In fact, I have made a point of establishing their continuity over a period of many years, for it is the long-range, cumulative effect that really counts. So, you may ask: What is new about ICA?

I believe that there are enough new concepts and different emphases in the creation of ICA to warrant describing it as a turning point, a step into a more promising era in the history of our relations with other nations.

First, as conceived in the President's Reorganization Plan, the International Communication Agency gives institutional form to a departure from our past views of the purpose and the means of utilizing information and cultural programs in the national interest. For the first time, non-official people and ideas and the function of communication in foreign relations have been given the opportunity to play a commanding role in our foreign affairs. I believe the only serious question is whether we have the intellectual capacities, imagination, self-discipline and energy to respond effectively.

Second, the creation of ICA represents recognition of the two-way nature of our international relations. As executor abroad of educational and cultural exchange programs, the old U.S. Information Agency had in part encouraged dialogue, but its mission was essentially to tell others about our policies and our society. In contrast, two-way

communication is basic to the concept of an international communication agency. President Carter's statement of ICA's mission clearly sets this forth. He said:

"It is in the general interest of the community of nations, as well as in our own interest, that other nations and other peoples know where this great country stands, and why. We want them to understand our values, our institutions -- the vitality of our culture -- and how these relate to their own experience. We must share our successes, and look for help in learning from our failures. We must make available to people of other nations facts they would not otherwise learn about ourselves and our views.

"It is also in our interest," he said, "-- and in the interest of other nations -- that Americans have the opportunity to understand the histories, cultures and problems of others, so that we can come to understand their hopes, perceptions and aspirations. In so doing, the Agency will contribute to our capacity as a people and as a government to manage our foreign affairs with sensitivity, in an effective and responsible way."

Third, the creation of ICA marks a break with outmoded notions of the communication process that dominated government information and cultural programs in the post-World War II international climate. When the first legislative basis for these programs was laid in 1948, we had just emerged from the most severe test our nation -- or the world -- has ever had of our national commitment to freedom and democracy. The "Cold War" that ensued preserved and extended the atmosphere of confrontation, of struggle. So it is perhaps natural that we saw our mission in terms of a "battle for the minds of men."

We have changed fundamentally since then, in parallel with the changing view of the communication process which many of you have developed. Separately and from each other, you and we have learned a great deal. The cross-feed of our professional interest has always been stimulating. Some of you may recall that Wilbur Schramm's classic book, The Process and Effects of Mass Communication, was originally prepared for the training program of the old U.S. Information Agency. We will surely welcome your equally thoughtful attention in the future.

A most significant change effected over the years of our experience -- one now central to the manner in which ICA goes about its work -- is the shift from a reactive stance to a positive, long-haul view of what an international communication agency should attempt to accomplish. From persuasion we have moved to what one might call dialogue, the basic premise of which is that the kind of communication program that does the most good is the kind that participants and audiences rely on because they find its content to be reliable and helpful. From quantity we have moved to quality. And dazzling as modern communication technology is, we give primacy to inter-personal communication, to "software" over "hardware."

We must be more than communicators, or conduits and facilitators of communication. In some communications environments information is plentiful. It flows from a variety of sources -- commercial radio, television, movies, books. Where information is not so readily available, it is a straightforward process to provide it. The more formidable, the more important challenge is to ensure that communication leads to enhanced understanding. Our task requires study of the flow of information to determine where there are distortions which need correction, where there are lapses which produce misunderstandings, where there is no framework within which information can be assimilated to produce comprehension. And then we must determine how best to enrich the supply of information to produce enhanced understanding. These are important analytical tasks. They have been addressed in the past, but perhaps not with the rigor -- even the intellectual agony -- our new institution and mandate require. The President and his White House have been supportive at every turn. We have an obligation to return full measure of intellect and effort.

Launching a new venture is exciting. But a chart, a compass, a good crew, a favorable wind do not of themselves insure smooth progress on the course that has been set for us. That will require keen navigation and good seamanship, for these are new waters. There are problems of a practical and of a philosophical nature.

The first problem, perhaps, is that of melding into a purposeful whole the two parts of the Federal establishment -- USIA and the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs -- that bring to ICA three decades of cross-cultural communication experience. The separate existence of these two functions for so many years encouraged the artificial distinction between what is "information" and what is "cultural." Even the names of the two predecessor organizations embodied that supposed difference.

"Information" was "hard"; "culture" was "soft." Information was political, hard-nosed, immediate and short term. Culture was apolitical, mild, aloof from real-life problems and long-haul in its utility. The two were thought to be totally incompatible.

A colleague with long experience in Eastern Europe has cited the example of a visit by a leading American modern dance troupe to the Communist country where he has served. Accustomed to the classical forms, maintained in sterile perfection, in another Communist country which professes its "progressive" nature, the local audience experienced what can only be termed a revelation. Here, in modern American dance, was something dynamic, not static; something truly progressive; something powerfully expressive of American society.

The American troupe was a smash success. Because it was "cultural" it was "safe." But the real significance of this particular artistic act was political. No conceivable press release or official statement, no pamphlet, brochure or radio broadcast could have achieved comparable effect.

We have decreed the end to the largely arbitrary distinction between culture and information. The nature of our new mission makes it obsolete. But I know the idea will tend to persist. To the extent that it does, it will hamper getting on with our new job. We are much in need of an integrating -- and integrated -- idea or notion for our combined functions. I don't like words such as theory or doctrine -- theory tends to be abstract and doctrine can become an intellectual straitjacket -- but we do have a need to communicate our purposes and integrate our techniques effectively within our own ranks. We require a conceptual framework, and we would hope that you -- among others -- will be prepared to help.

Several questions may illustrate my point. USIA produced very high-quality media products: radio broadcasts, magazines, films, videotapes. They were -- and are -- designed to inform. The exchanges programs bring individuals together for shared learning experiences. Neither effort is fully beneficial, in part because they have lacked conceptual integration.

-- Can we use our media products to stimulate active intellectual interchange, rather than passive, highly individual learning? Can our magazines, for example, be integrated more effectively into an international "discussion" of ideas? If so, how?

-- More frequently than should be the case, one suspects, the exchanges programs gratify individual needs or desires. Can we enhance the social utilities of such programs? If so, how and for what acceptable purposes?

-- If -- the Voice of America aside -- we are not truly in the business of mass communication, how do we most economically identify and engage persons already involved in the formulation, discussion and exchange of ideas? How can we maximize our learning from them? How can our ideas be amplified through certain kinds of individuals to larger segments of foreign societies? How can we most effectively construct an international and interpersonal communication process?

We have at least tentative answers to some of these questions, questions which are both practical and theoretical. As we approach them pragmatically, you could assist us to enhance our theoretical knowledge and framework.

Indeed, we have had assistance -- both practical and theoretical -- of an important kind in recent months. Last summer we posed a question (the wrong one, it developed) to Daniel Yankelovich: How do we decide, all 8,500 of us, which "America" to convey to foreigners?

He responded that we couldn't decide. That we should ask foreigners how they defined the attributes of "good" and "bad" societies, and where they ranked the United States according to their own criteria. We should ascertain what they did not know about us, not what we did know.

In short, he said, let the audience define its own needs. Then respond accordingly.

These are the kinds of simple communications propositions of which we are most in need. In some respects, they may simply clarify the obvious. But they do clarify.

And, in this case, the encounter may lead to the complete overhaul of our research program along lines subsequently proposed, after an extensive pro bono publico inquiry, by Mr. Yankelovich and his associates, William Watts and Everett Ladd. His report, submitted just last week, is a major public service.

Another problem for the new agency stems from our responsibility for encouraging two-way communication. What are the limits of propriety in performing this function? Or the legal limits, for that matter? We Americans have been wisely wary of allowing our government to meddle with the flow of information. Dissemination in the United States of ICA products designed for foreign audiences is prohibited by law. How then will ICA discharge its responsibility for giving Americans "the opportunity to understand the histories, cultures and problems of others"?

The answer, I think, is outlined in President Carter's statement of ICA's mission and in what I have said about the primacy of interpersonal communication. The President's statement points out that "the most effective sharing of culture, ideas and information comes between individual people rather than through formal acts of governments."

By far the greater volume of international communication lies outside the channels of government. The people of all nations are, whether they wish it or not, whether they know it or not, engaged in foreign affairs as more or less well-informed observers, holders of opinion, supporters or opponents of policy. They are also engaged as participants in international networks of scholars, businessmen, scientists, professionals, artists pursuing mutual interest to mutual advantage.

The President has enjoined us to "encourage private institutions in this country to develop their own forms of exchange and aid those that are in the broadest national interest." We are, in his words, "to assist individual Americans and institutions in learning about other nations and their cultures."

Thus, our role at ICA is not to originate or transmit information about other nations. We are not and cannot be the spokesmen for foreign governments or peoples. Rather, we strive to promote the linkages that permit freer communication.

I have spoken of ICA as a conduit and facilitator of communication. We might also be likened to a switchboard operator, whose function it is to make the proper connections. I do not see this role as inconsistent in any way with deeply-held American convictions about the dangers of government interference with freedom of information. On the contrary, one of our tasks is to help insure the freest possible international flow of information.

An abiding problem, to which I alluded at the outset, is the lack of an informed and supportive constituency in this country for government programs that in the past have largely made their impact abroad. The activities of the former Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs are known in the American academic world because of the two-way traffic exchange programs generated. But the old Information Agency, forbidden by law to disseminate domestically, had no following.

This was a serious handicap under earlier conditions. It will be even more damaging to the new agency and, I think, to the national interest if the International Communication Agency is unable to establish its own connection with the American people. In an editorial commenting on the birth of the agency, the Washington Post affirmed that "few things are more important to the American interest, broadly conceived, than telling the world about ourselves -- and listening." If that affirmation is correct, as I believe it to be, then I would solicit your help -- as individuals and as an association -- in establishing our identity, purposes and accomplishments in the minds of our fellow citizens.

Large numbers of Americans are quite knowledgeable about what their government does in the field of international commodity trade. Not so with the international flow of ideas. The farmer in the wheat belt is aware of the foreign trade or aid prospects when there's a drought in South Asia. Not so with ideas. The U.S. Treasury announces it will auction gold, and the stock market reacts favorably. Not so with ideas.

There is no "Big Board" for ideas.

Yet ideas and people are what it's all about because, as H. G. Wells once wrote, "Human history is in essence a history of ideas."

I cannot foresee how this problem will be solved: In part, perhaps, through opportunities such as the one you have afforded me this morning. A larger volume of official exchanges, which we propose, will also help create greater and more widespread understanding of our purpose. And finally, the joining for common aims of two parts of the Executive Branch unnaturally separated for so long will project a clearer and hopefully more commanding image of important purpose. The whole of our ICA is -- like the whole of yours -- certainly greater than the sum of its parts.

In the final analysis, however, our case may rest on our bedrock purpose as an institution: to create ways of broadening human possibilities. We are the antithesis of "learned helplessness." Our existence is itself an affirmation. We <u>can</u> contribute to "learned potency." We shall surely try.

Ladies and gentlemen, as Dean Williams has said, you are an interested constituency of this new Agency. I hope that my account explains some of the directions we are taking and encourages your further attention and support. We would value both.

Thank you.